

Soldiers *Online*



Leader of the

Band

Story by Beth Reece
Photos by Paul Disney

JAMES W. McGarity Jr. is a confiding, southern man with silver-speckled hair. Goaded by his dad the meat cutter, he cracked life's secret early on: find purpose, don't loaf.

"Sweep the floor, son. Don't just stand around with your hands in your pockets," Dad would holler to the idling boy over the can-stacked aisles of their family owned market in the '50s. The family was poor then, and Wednesdays were special, when a "closed" sign dangling from the door really meant "father and sons gone fishing."

But Tuesdays meant work, even for a schoolboy. On Tuesdays, McGarity learned the art of commitment, devoting himself to the brassy pitch of his beloved trumpet. "When I was in third grade, Mom and Dad took us to see a parade on Peachtree Street in Atlanta. That's when I knew I wanted to be a musician. Three weeks later my parents were talking to the school's music director."

Then the family started sacrificing so McGarity could take private, half-hour lessons for \$8 in a trade that would make sure he never lagged. In fact, he would always be hustling and soaring. He wrote history: one of the Army's top trumpet players, the Army's leading drum major, one of the longest-serving sergeants major America has ever known.

Destiny Knocks

McGarity's musical flair bloomed in junior high and high school. At age 17, he suited up in black tails and a bow tie, starring once a month for half

a year at the Tower Theater with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. Though underage, he played backup for Wayne Newton in Atlanta's dim, sooty Domino Lounge. And one year later he blew to the top trumpet slot in the University of Georgia's Dixie Redcoat Band.

Meanwhile, membership in Atlanta's Federation of Musicians landed McGarity in backup gigs with such budding stars as Dionne Warwick. Even the hotshots needed a hand. So while swooning fans drooled over record players, the lucky trumpeter blew background sounds for Johnny Rivers, Jan and Dean, Jerry Lee Lewis and the original Drifters.

"But I always wanted to be better than I was," McGarity said of himself as a college freshman. So he quit the books and took a job with airline caterer Dobbs House, starting off loading and unloading food trays.

At 19, McGarity married the girl who'd smiled and waved to him from her family's front porch whenever he delivered groceries as a boy. Then Dobbs House crowned him supervisor. And again, destiny knocked.

McGarity's bride was diagnosed with cancer. Hospital visits were perpetual and bills mounted. Friends eventually suggested he join the

service, guessing medical care would be good — and free. "So I went to Fort McPherson and auditioned for the post band." Within a couple of weeks he was soothed by the familiarity of first chair and his sick wife began treatment with military doctors.

In the Army Now

The Army's support was generous over the next three years until doctors told McGarity his wife would get better care at Walter Reed Medical Center in Washington, D.C. His only ticket north was a rare, open slot with the U.S. Army Band, "Pershing's Own." So the 22-year-old auditioned, blasting open doors with his trumpet. But victory dimmed when, in February 1970, his wife died.

Resiliently, McGarity clung to the band. "I liked performing with the Army and always wanted to be a drum major," he said. "When I first got here there were a lot of good trumpet players, but I was among the best. So being a drum major took a back seat."

Then came the golden day: the band's director put the drum major's mace into McGarity's yearning hands. "I had no training. They just said 'go out and do it.'" And he did, for 31

McGarity joined the Army at age 20 in 1966 (above, left). Within weeks of his arrival at the 3rd U.S. Army Band at Fort McPherson, Ga., (above) he had assumed the "first chair" position in the organization's trumpet section.

Above photos courtesy McGarity family

years after that day in March 1970.

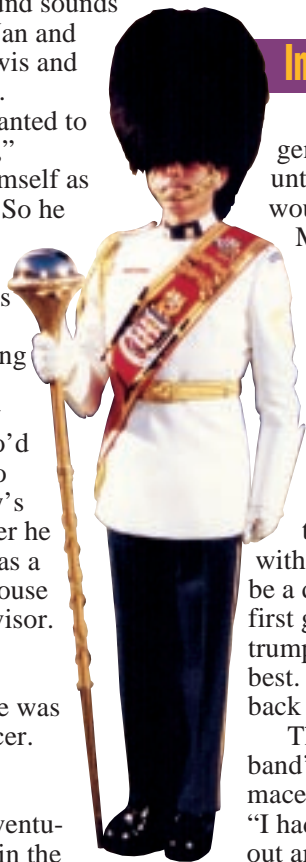
Today, the newly retired sergeant major spells luck with capital letters, having scored another success so rare it's unthinkable to most soldiers: for 21 years his shoulders carried the eight stripes and single star of the sergeants major corps. McGarity's time in grade makes him one of America's longest-serving sergeants major, and his Army career spanned 34 years.

"He is a legend," said trumpeter SFC Michael Cano, snapping his fingers to show how quickly the name "Jim McGarity" beckons a colorful sketch detailed by band members: friend, expert, reliable leader, artist, fair, warm, strong.

"Jim was born to be a drum major," said Debbie, his wife of 19 years — the woman who warmed McGarity's heart with a mug of hot chocolate after a winter rehearsal in 1982.

A Drum Major's Life

The drum major attended his share of funerals. "That was the down side of my job, the really hard part," he said,





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having led the Ceremonial Band through too many Arlington National Cemetery funerals to count after just a few years on the job. He also navigated the band through White House and Pentagon arrival ceremonies, monthly retirement parades at Fort Myer and Fort McNair, and at wreath-laying ceremonies at the Tomb of the Unknowns.

The dazzle of drum majoring beams at military tattoos, McGarity said, which recall the British and European traditions of bugles hailing soldiers back on post for the night. In such shows, McGarity rose as the Army's star, his chin imperiously tilted up so he could see out from beneath his two-foot bearskin hat.

Even retired, the drum major is in demand for these flashy productions. He charmed spectators at the Virginia International Tattoo in Norfolk in late April. This month he will perform at the International Marine Tattoo in Rochester, N.Y., and he's currently planning for the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command Tattoo at Fort Monroe, Va., in September.

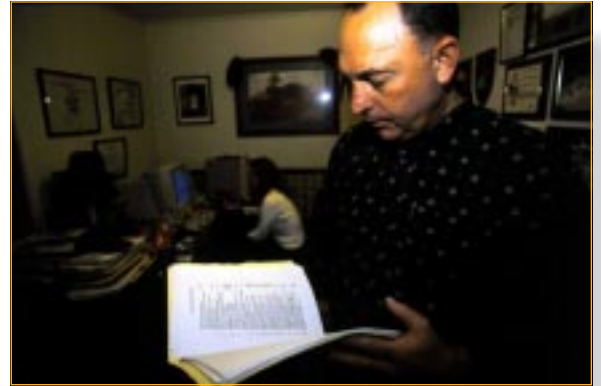
McGarity's fluid, white-gloved commands have been filmed across

America and abroad from Australia to Japan. "That means I've had to look the part and stay slim," said the 55-year-old. "In 30 years I've gone from a size 32 to only a size 35. I've seen some guys that look like they swallowed a watermelon. That makes me want to push the pecan pie away."

A routine that takes a band 8 to 10 hours to rehearse before its first performance takes McGarity two or three weeks to plan and script. Like a junkie, he watches final shows on video, rewinding and re-watching to soak in the audience's reaction.

"Debbie says we need a room just for my tapes." Videos line the white walls of McGarity's home office in the family's three-bedroom Colonial-style house in Arlington, Va. Newspaper clips and snapshots wallpaper the rooms; miniature drum majors clutter tables.

"You simply cannot walk into our house and not know that a drum major



In addition to being the Army's top trumpet player and leading drum major, McGarity is — at 21 years in grade — one of the nation's longest-serving sergeants major.

lives there," Debbie said, eyes rolling with the playful exasperation of a generally tolerant wife.

A Legend's Style

McGarity is renown for slipping the slow, gliding movements of British drum majors into his own drills. But he admitted that his preference for imitating others made him a laughing stock at the 1990 Swedish Army Tattoo, where his group was third in the introduction line.

"The first two bands didn't march back to the formation the way we were all told to do and had rehearsed," he said. So the drum major spun his head around, instructing band members to forget what they'd practiced, to follow his lead instead.

After the band's debut, McGarity snapped a salute and called a forward march. "I took off, and out of the corner of my eye saw our commander pointing the opposite way, laughing. I had taken off one direction while the band went the other."

Band members still laugh at McGarity's expense. But they miss him, too. "Even when he was busy, he'd make eye contact with us and ask how we were doing, like he really cared," said SSG Harry Watters, the

Courtesy U.S. Army Band



McGarity's fluid, white-gloved commands have been filmed across America and as far afield as Australia. His style mirrors the slow, gliding movements of British drum majors.

jazz trombonist McGarity handpicked to be a guest soloist at tattoos in Australia and Norway. "He brings out the best in all of us."

Sending the drum major on his way is like bidding farewell to a final link to the past, Watters said of the man who is most remembered for the way his body moved.

"This is the end of an era. In the '60s and '70s we had fun making music, but today it's tempo-tempo-tempo," McGarity said. "Now the band's nine components collectively perform 6,000 shows a year. There's no time to take a bow anymore."

McGarity would still twirl the Army's coveted mace if age and length of service rules hadn't taken that choice away. "But I won't stop. I can't imagine life without music."

Family Tradition

Most everyone the drum major loves is seduced by sound. His brother directs a high school band in Alabama and his mother was a vocalist. His wife Debbie, a master sergeant and woodwind group leader, has been a clarinetist with the U.S. Army Concert Band since 1977. The McGaritys share two sons and one daughter, who are following the family's musical tradition.

Letting Go

"I'll be glad when this is all over with. I've been tearing up like this for a year now," Debbie admitted three weeks before the drum major's retirement day. Finales clouded the last 10 months of McGarity's active career: the last funeral, the last inauguration, the last "Spirit of America," the last ceremony. A huge crowd gave the McGaritys a standing ovation at his last concert, in March.

"I will never forget watching him in his drum major uniform when I first

got here," Debbie said. "He looked so good and was friendly to everybody. I loved watching him."

A week before his final day, McGarity braved a mike in the band's recording studio. Thirty-four years of Army experience taught him that a crowd can spy on a performer's soul. So he rehearsed — not the sound of a horn or a borrowed British move, but the final, bygone words of so long.

"What can I say on that day? Deep inside, my heart will be pounding and I'll know that I won't be a part of this again."

McGarity refuses to fade, even if all that's left of his career as the Army's top drum major is a legacy, a tattoo here and there.

"I couldn't have dreamed up a better plan for my life if I'd wanted to," he said. □



Even retired, the drum major is in demand for military tattoos. He will perform at the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command Tattoo at Fort Monroe, Va., in September.